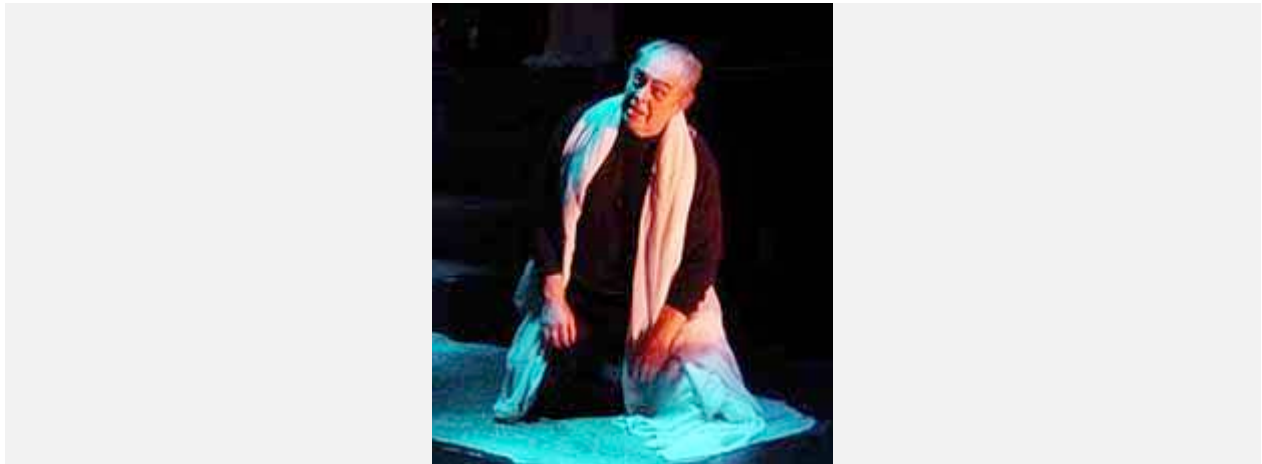


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## **Paul Dresher's 'The Tyrant' unlocks mysteries of mind Vivid opera explores madness of monarch**

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Beacon Journal



Tenor John Duykers portrays a king on the edge of madness in composer Paul Dresher's 'The Tyrant.'

Paul Dresher is sort of a West Coast indie-rock guy in classical music.

*The Tyrant*, his slender, pitch-perfect work about a king possibly going mad, is called an opera, but it's a whole different animal from grand opera. With a libretto by Jim Lewis, Dresher creates an intimate, dreamy world in tandem with *The King Listens*, the short story by Italo Calvino that inspired the project.

Dresher originally was commissioned to write *The Tyrant* as a companion piece to the modern classic *Eight Songs for a Mad King* by Peter Maxwell Davies. When Dresher composed it, he had in mind the tenor John Duykers, a longtime colleague, as the single singer.

In a pre-performance talk in Cleveland, Dresher said that this production, which ran about an hour without intermission, is an expanded version of the 2005 piece. It retains the original instrumentation, which matches that of the Davies piece.

An ensemble of six crackerjack players -- Tod Brody, flutes and piccolo; Peter Josheff, clarinets; Marja Mutru, piano; Joel Davel, percussion; Alex Kelly, cello; Karen Bently Pollick, violin -- sat on stage at the Bolton Theatre to play the spare but eloquent score.

*Continued next page*

Sitting on an angular metal throne, or moving about below a metal pavilion, this king lives a vivid life of the mind. It is the 20th anniversary of his rise to power, which we are told was a bloody ascent. Now it's unclear whether he is losing his mind in imagining an overthrow, or just in a state of hyper-awareness.

The king's changes of tone or topic are mirrored in the shifting saturated colors of the lighting by Tom Ontiveros. Adding to the sense of paranoia, two video screens displayed symmetrically onstage are used sometimes to monitor the action, too.

The king's acute awareness is captured in a sweet lullaby of his imagination, as well as in the weird sounds (vividly imagined by Dresher) that a home -- even a castle -- makes at night. Dresher's style is refreshingly free of any identifiable school, most of all of any academic quality. The score's airiness, its rich percussion and its distilled beauty are all distinctive elements.

On Tuesday, Duykers inhabited the part completely. His ability to find his own melodic lines, which so often run independently of the instrumentalists, was impressive, as was his acting. Duykers was especially poignant when he stripped off his pinstriped suit coat and came forward to sit on the stairs leading to the audience, as his character broke down...

...*The Tyrant* sends out a good vibe about FusionFest, the multidisciplinary festival in progress at the Cleveland Play House. Sometimes what's billed as a festival in Cleveland is just a repackaging of what's always here in Northeast Ohio. To bring in a recent (1-year-old) opera of this quality, performed by six world-class instrumentalists and an excellent actor/singer, signals a valuable interest in looking to see what's happening elsewhere.

It also alerts the public that *The Tyrant's* co-presenter, Opera Cleveland (formerly Cleveland Opera and Lyric Opera Cleveland) might be interested in shaking up the status quo for its recently merged groups. That could be the most interesting development of all.

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